

### Chapter 3: The Footsteps of Shaitan

When I awoke, the headache subsided, and the apartment was empty. They probably left to visit Him. By now the sun was at its zenith, surrounded by a brilliant blue sapphire sky, an inviting image for those who with a life worth living (so long as one ignored the heat). For the past year, almost all my time was spent asleep. But it never made me feel refreshed, a lingering tension persisting in my neck upwards. Every time I thought about Him, that Memory bubbled just under the surface, reminding me of things I wanted to forget, and with that Memory came the tensing of all my muscles in preparation of a fight.

The extent to which He transformed the old three-bedroom apartment could not be overstated. A part of me still vaguely remembers holding a light while He checked a faucet or screwed a hinge onto a cabinet or any of the other thousands of things He did. I was going to mess something up. It was only a matter of time. He would tell me to get something, and I would be unable to find it, I would try my best to suppress my panic as His anger and frustration ballooned at my mounting failure, reminding me once more that I was stupid and worthless. He was going to do the same with this apartment, but He only got partway through repainting the walls. Part of me was glad we did not have to go through that charade once more, but the half-dried purple reminded me why. I could not allow myself to remember. I needed to go somewhere else, and what better place than a local library. I could probably work on job applications better there.

When I was a university student, I believed I could help solve the world's problems if I read enough books. That was often the rationale behind orthodox Muslim ambivalence towards gender and sexuality. When compared to issues in economics, labour, sectarianism, nationalism, imperialism, colonialism, and genocide, why should a Muslim with integrity sacrifice so much time and energy towards the ancillary grievances of women and sexual minorities. I suppose in their minds gender and sexuality issues inevitably lead to colonialist talking points. Of course, they ignore how their own obsession with preventing *zinā* (fornication/adultery) and *fitna* (social discord) in their communities and nations politically centers gender and sexuality. Regardless, I think there is some validity to the general sense that gender and sexuality should be contextualized with issues like imperialism, economics, and nationalism. But to do that, one must read, so I distracted myself from my own issues to focus on comprehending worldly issues.

I spent my waking hours inside a university library. It was a concrete castle resembling a bunker from the world wars. Its upper floors were comprised of stacks upon stacks of books on every subject from comic books to the Soviet Union to *ḥādīth*. A thousand of them have probably never been read in the last hundred years. In those upper floors lies a silent alcove with a table, chair, and computer. In that alcove, I read the books of this library while using the computer to write essays for courses. This alcove was right next to a washroom and faucet, providing easy access to refreshment, so eight hours could go by if I did not pay attention. I spent so long inside the concrete that it became more of a home than home since His anger and religious policing could not reach me. I stayed there as late as possible so that as little time as possible was spent at home while He was awake and religious. Libraries became the only place where I could think in peace.

“Neither you nor the world will ever be fixed,” the wind whispered as I got ready. “The

human spirit<sup>1</sup> will always be weaponized against itself.”

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I did not listen to this nonsensical cynicism, gently sliding my laptop into a backpack. It was battered and broken at the hinges, but functional if I leaned it against something. The wires jutting out from the grey plastic could get caught on something if I was not careful. But as I saw the screen light up, I was forced to remember that the exposed chips, disks, boards, cases, and cables testified to the weaponization of the human spirit.

According to Christoph N. Vogel’s 2022 book, *Conflict Minerals, Inc.: War, Profit and White Saviorism in Eastern Congo*, tech products are made with minerals like tin, tantalum/coltan, tungsten (the *3T* minerals), and gold.<sup>2</sup> They are also “conflict minerals,” suspected to partially originate in artisanal mines, which is informal mining done by individuals for basic subsistence.<sup>3</sup> Enterprising warlords in eastern Congo fund their operations by controlling these mines.<sup>4</sup> The warlords get funding for their bullets while Western consumers get cool gadgets. This is an unsurprising story for many Western progressives concerned with justice, hence why I do not purchase electronics so long as my existing ones functioned. I have the same approach to all the products in my life.

“This is a story divorced from the truth,” the wind whispered. “This is a story born from Western ‘experts’ who flatten war to mere greed.”<sup>5</sup> They do not care to understand the territorial conflicts between local kingdoms in the late nineteenth century, the exploitative resource extraction under Belgian colonialism, or the fracturing of ethnic identity under Belgian rule.<sup>6</sup> They do not care to understand their anti-communist hysteria against Congo’s first Prime Minister, Patrice Lumumba, which helped establish Joseph Mobutu’s regime.<sup>7</sup> They do not care to understand the corruption, ethnically-divided citizenship, and conflicts over land under

Mobutu's regime,<sup>8</sup> the erosion of his state's legitimacy in the early 1990s, the destabilizing affect of the Rwandan genocide, and the unstable peace following Mobutu's overthrow in the 1996 First Congo War.<sup>9</sup> They do not really care about the spread of chronic conflict in the decades following the 1998 Second Congo War. They just want to treat the growing list of armed groups in the region as entrepreneurs reflective of Congo's violent society,<sup>10</sup> interested only in shaming Congo until 'it gets its act together.' If only countries could be pulled up by their bootstraps."

I could not disagree with the wind, even as I put on my socks, a toe poking through a hole in one of them. When I read Vogel's book, I found it quite difficult to keep track of this complex history, and even more difficult to keep track of the acronyms of the growing list of armed groups in the region. Everything the wind criticized about Western experts was something I could criticize about myself. So, it should be no surprise that most Western discourse on eastern Congo framed conflicts and artisanal mining as signs of a greedy, backwards, and passive society in need of a civilized liberal market economy.

"The human spirit cares not for the truth," the wind whispered. "It cares only for that which serves the interests of the powerful. You know this to be true."

All that human spirit whipped up to create section 1502 of the 2010 Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act. In Congo it is known as *loi Obama* (Obama's law), requiring companies on US stock markets to disclose if 3T and gold in their supply chains comes from eastern Congo or neighbouring countries.<sup>11</sup>

"How righteous these activists must have felt, thinking they were holding their countries and companies accountable."

And yet all this did was help create the *iTSCi* (International Tin Supply Chain Initiative), a private sector-driven programme to formalise and trace artisanal mining minerals. It was

created by the *ITA* (International Tin Association), a lobby organisation for tin-using industries, with collaboration from Congolese government agencies.<sup>12</sup> This programme created a *monopsony* (markets with one legal buyer), with the *iTSCi* acting as an additional intermediary between artisanal miners and tin-using industries who buy their minerals. Mining that is not validated by the *iTSCi* is rendered illegal, consolidating this *monopsony*.”<sup>13</sup>

“And so, all that human spirit was weaponized against physical violence to inflict structural violence. This *monopsonic* system supposedly provides transparency and oversight over mineral traceability.<sup>14</sup> And yet, the auditing and certification schemes are beset with fraud and contamination, so its success in ‘resolving’ the conflict minerals issue itself is dubious.”<sup>15</sup>

The wind did not even voice the worst part. The narrow focus on conflict minerals undermines the informal economy supporting small-scale artisanal miners by forcing them to sell at lower prices to offset the costs of supply-chain auditing (miners could not legally sell to anyone else if they found the lower prices unfair).<sup>16</sup> This pushes them into precarity and unemployment, which drives recruitment towards the armed groups that mineral tracing was supposed to stop.<sup>17</sup>

“And now that Congo has left the news cycle, the people of these countries can act as if the Congo never existed,” the wind whispered. “They can believe that petitions, hashtags, clicks, and billboards put an end to warlords,<sup>18</sup> and when Congo inevitably returns to the news cycle, they can indulge in righteous fury against the somehow perpetually backwards cultures that never adopt Western values.”

I could not disagree with the wind, even as I donned my cargo pants and black *thawb*. The pants had a knife sheathed inside one of those big side pockets that would only ever be sewn on male pants (I was not complaining about the added pocket space). The knife was small,

designed more for cutting fruits than flesh, but it provided security (so long as its potentially illegal status was never noticed).

“But do not ever deceive yourself into thinking that your life was built upon anything except the exploitation of your betters,” the wind demanded. “Never delude yourself into accepting their butchering of reality. Every solution they promote is a trojan horse. You may find a genuine solution occasionally, but you know that this too will fail. For it to be genuine, it must require a change in power dynamics, and for that to happen, the collective human spirit must be amassed behind it, which is impossible because the collective human spirit prefers simple solutions over complex ones, and there are no simple solutions, only simple trojan horses.”<sup>19</sup>

The worst part was that those four years studying political science did not do anything to make me disagree with the wind. I hoped that by the end I would have the confidence to do something to make this world a slightly less bad place and distract me from my own problems. But after reading it all and suppressing my *nafs* for so long, I suspected sin and evil and failure in every option set before me. I did not want to believe in the futility of the pursuit of justice. I do not think Vogel or the other scholars whose books I read in that concrete castle would have wanted all their time and effort squandered supporting the edgy, nihilistic apathy plaguing a repressed Muslim. But it became impossible for me to believe that this species was capable of the long, hard, and ambiguous road towards justice. I could believe that this species was tough enough to survive and “progress” into the future, but I could not believe that people like me had a place in that future. As far as I was concerned, I was just a dinosaur. Would the birds of tomorrow be any better than the birds of today at remembering their extinct kin?

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I shook my head in a futile attempt to forget. I had too many problems to care about

coltan now. I instead donned the black leather coat laying on a chair. It extended from my collar to my knees and smelled like cigarettes, no doubt completely unsuitable for the summer. But it provided safety, and so too did the sheathed knife I keep in one of its pockets (just in case I was in a situation where I could not fish for the knife in the cargo pants).

If there was a time in your life when you knew your death was imminent, every second becomes a tightening of the noose. All dreams condensed to 8,760 hours if you had a year's prognosis. Have you ever wanted to see the northern lights? Now you must plan that out, on top of everything else in your life. Have you ever wanted to write a book? If it is a hundred pages long, that gives you 3.65 days per page on average, excluding the editing time, on top of the northern lights, on top of everything else. There was not enough time to remind myself of my guilts and failures. Besides, that Promise already made me waste so much time convincing myself that a secret did not really exist. What was the point in reminding myself that I never belonged?

After filling my water bottle, I checked the stove. It was one of those chrome metallic ones made with a cooktop of black glass. The glass was cracked, spiderwebs extending across the surface, but it still got the job done. Ten times out of ten we kept it off when we were not heating up something. But incendiary possibilities kept me checking.

The heating elements were as cold as ice. False alarm. I opened the door to go out, but embers of doubt flared.

Did I misread the dials?

When I went back to check, one of them was off a couple millimeters to the left, so I repositioned it slightly. Was it now off a couple millimeters to the right? I could not tell, no matter how many different angles I looked at it. I repositioned it anyways.

I got myself hallway down the hallway when those doubts smouldered.

What if the oven was on? That was unlikely, but all it takes is one oversight. Ten seconds of scrutiny had to be worth it.

No heat in the oven, even when I placed a finger on the heating elements inside. It was difficult to separate truth from falsehood, so I checked the stove and oven a second time, then a third time for good measure. But as I strode towards the elevator, the whispers proliferated, no longer bound by the wind.

“You only saw what you wished to see,” the whispers chorused. “You, like all humans, pretend that reality serves your identity. If your identity compels you to believe that backwards, barbaric religions are the cause of all the problems in this world, your reality will easily bend to serve that belief. The same is true if your identity compels you to believe that sinful, decadent queers are the cause of all the problems in this world.”

Most people I came across did not want to recognize this reality bending capacity in their identities. Nor did they want to be reminded that their spirits were weaponized by systems of power to inflict harm and suffering upon themselves and others. I wanted to be a person of accountability and integrity, or at least a person with some self-awareness, which meant that I always asked myself, “Am I seeing reality as it is or just what I wished to see?”

“Do not think your interrogation makes you better than others,” the whispers chastised. “Just a cursory glance at the research revealed all the sins and contradiction in your identities.<sup>20</sup> You have only found queerphobia in your Muslim identity.<sup>21</sup> You have only found violence and entitlement in your masculine identity.<sup>22</sup> She has only found drug abuse and Islamophobia in her queer identity<sup>23</sup> and racism in her feminist identity.<sup>24</sup> You have both succumbed to the



assimilationism in your Canadian identity,<sup>25</sup> too stupid to even learn the language of His people.”<sup>26</sup>

These condemnations compelled me to stare down at the grey carpet flooring in front of the elevator door. I believed in the laws of *fiqh*, but no longer believed justice or humanity were relevant to the *fiqh*. I presented myself as masculine, but no longer believed there was any humanity in masculinity. She knew what she was, but did not believe anybody would be there for her. We lived in this country, but we no longer identified with this country, nor did we ever identify with His country. The erosion of all my identities led me into isolation and despondency, which is just another way to weaponize the human spirit against itself.

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But none of this identity stuff had any relevance to my senses. In that domain, there was nothing to doubt. I checked the heating elements, the dials, the dials a second time, the oven, the dials a third time, the oven a second time, and the oven and dials a final time. There is nothing to be ambiguous about. In that domain at least, I could ignore the whispers.

But as the elevator slowly and loudly chugged down the elevator shaft, the shadows cast by the old, flickering lights above me changed shape. The shadows morphed and shifted, appearing like smoke, then knives, then skulls, and then figures resembling the skeletons of boys and girls.

“It should have been us,” the flickering shadows whispered. “We would have made this world a better place. We would have made your father proud.”

I ignored them. This is just an orientalist fantasy born from an overactive imagination. His country has not had a famine since 1974. But His country has also had regional *maṅḡā* (near-

famines), and the labourers in His country working menial jobs<sup>27</sup> would no doubt curse me as nothing more than a sinner unworthy of the privileges I did not earn.

I tried focusing on the world immediately around me instead. The wall, where some of the tiles were broken. The old, worn carpeting, where I saw an old piece of gum. The metallic sounds of the elevator door shifting into place.

“Instead, He sacrificed everything he could ever be to raise a worthless failure,” they whispered. I closed my eyes to avoid their emaciated forms.

The elevator door opened, and I stepped inside, grinding my molars to dust. The lights inside the elevator were dim and flickering too, so their shadows continued to follow me wherever I went.

“That is too generous,” one of them whispered. “He made something worth less than nothing.”

I stepped out onto the apartment lobby, hands clenched into fists, trying to ignore my rotting spirit.

“What would one call such a thing?” another asked, its voice reverberating against the old concrete walls.

As I pushed through the entrance of the building, the wind whistled around me, and they chorused several condemnations in a fit of laughter.

“Fool.”

“Sinner.”

“Transgressor.”

“Traitor.”

Their endless laughter reverberated across my head like hammers. I could not disagree with them.

I spun around, their cackling chorus dripping venom deep into my throbbing skull.

“Parasite.”

“Worthless.”

“Subhuman.”

“Abomination.”

They declared that last word as I trudged up a staircase, its whose painted walls peeling layer by layer like picked scabs.

They repeated that word.

They repeated it again.

And again.

And again, without end, even as I opened the door.

I turned on the stove, waiting for it to heat up, and I did what was familiar to me.

After some time, they went silent, leaving me alone with waves and waves of pain radiating across shaking and swelling fingers as I turned off the stove. Pain flared with every flex and movement of the joints, but it was tolerable. More tolerable than the ambiguity. Of course, their voices will return, and of course this did not do anything to make the next time any better, but at least I knew for certain if I was to blame in the event of a fire. The only thing that mattered to me was making a choice that could remove the ambiguity, even if it was the wrong one.

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Ch 3 Notes

<sup>1</sup> Note that the concepts of the “human spirit” and the “collective human spirit” are loosely inspired by the Hegelian concepts of *Geist* (spirit, intellect, mind, consciousness), *Volksgeist* (national spirit, spirit of a nation), and *Weltgeist* (world spirit/universal world spirit). This connection is not rigorous, so familiarity with Hegel is unnecessary, though it might help (or hinder) understanding if “human spirit” and “collective human spirit” seems too abstract. See: Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Allen W. Wood, and H. B. (Hugh Barr) Nisbet, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 11, 62–64 (s. 33), 195 (s. 151), 312 (s. 274), 366–367 (s. 331), 373–375 (s. 344–348), 486, 494–495.

<sup>2</sup> Christoph N. Vogel, *Conflict Minerals, Inc.: War, Profit and White Saviourism in Eastern Congo* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 3–5, 68–69.

<sup>3</sup> “Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining,” *Forum on Mining, Minerals, Metals and Sustainable Development (IGF)*, Accessed August 20, 2024, <https://www.igfmining.org/artisanal-and-small-scale-mining/>; Vogel, *Conflict Minerals*, p. 73.

<sup>4</sup> Vogel, *Conflict Minerals*, p. 3, 75–77.

<sup>5</sup> Note that conflict mineral literature relies on “greed hypotheses” to explain conflict. These hypotheses claim that war is caused by people who make conflict in the pursuit of profits. Vogel argues that while mineral profits are a means to an end in war, the ends themselves do not really revolve around profit-seeking: Vogel, *Conflict Minerals*, p. 116–118, 184, 206–207.

<sup>6</sup> Vogel, *Conflict Minerals*, p. 28–31.; Vincent Bevins, *The Jakarta Method Washington’s Anticommunist Crusade and the Mass Murder Program That Shaped Our World* (New York: Public Affairs, 2020), p. 35.

<sup>7</sup> Bevins, *The Jakarta Method*, p. 83–84, 185, 284n19.

<sup>8</sup> Vogel, *Conflict Minerals*, p. 31–33.

<sup>9</sup> Vogel, *Conflict Minerals*, p. 33–34.

<sup>10</sup> Vogel, *Conflict Minerals*, p. 34–35, 38–39, 54–55, 63–65, 174, 193–197.

<sup>11</sup> Vogel, *Conflict Minerals*, p. xiv, 1, 4–6, 8–10, 88–90, 94–95, 170.

<sup>12</sup> Vogel, *Conflict Minerals*, p. 6–7, 110.

<sup>13</sup> Vogel, *Conflict Minerals*, p. 110–112, 191–192.

<sup>14</sup> Vogel, *Conflict Minerals*, p. 112–113, 109, 120, 190–191.

<sup>15</sup> Vogel, *Conflict Minerals*, p. 114–115, 118, 192–193.

<sup>16</sup> Vogel, *Conflict Minerals*, p. 113–114, 123–125, 140–142, 191, 204.

<sup>17</sup> Vogel, *Conflict Minerals*, p. 7, 12, 118, 121–122.

<sup>18</sup> Vogel, *Conflict Minerals*, p. 16–17, 88–90, 94.

<sup>19</sup> Note that many would argue that this focus on success and failure is an error. Focusing so much on macro-scale success as the benchmark for making micro-scale actions seems a bit erroneous. But it is understandable why someone who is isolated, depressed, who fears failure, and who doubts their abilities might be so petrified by the prospect of macrocosmic failure to never even attempt microcosmic activities.

<sup>20</sup> Note that there is a difference between a cursory glance at research and an in-depth analysis of research. Perhaps the sins and contradictions found in cursory glances are more reflective of the reader than what they read.

<sup>21</sup> Note that while Muslims are not essentially queerphobic, the social performance of identity can make it difficult for some to believe that their Muslim identity has strong defenses against queerphobia: See: Brishti Basu, “They don’t represent me’: LGBTQ Muslims, allies speak out after ‘parental rights’ protests,” *CBC News*, October 5, 2023, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/lgbtq-muslims-speak-out-1.6985792>.

<sup>22</sup> Note that while masculinity is not essentially violent and entitled, the social performance of identity can make it difficult for some to believe that their masculine identity has strong defenses against violent entitlement: See: John Mercer, and Mark McGlashan, *Toxic Masculinity: Men, Meaning, and Digital Media* (New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2022).; Carol Harrington, *Neoliberal Sexual Violence Politics: Toxic Masculinity and #MeToo*, (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-07088-4>.; Traci Brynne Voyles, “Toxic Masculinity: California’s Salton Sea and the Environmental Consequences of Manliness,” *Environmental History* 26, no. 1 (2021): 127–41. <https://doi.org/10.1093/envhis/emma076>.

<sup>23</sup> Note that while queer identity is not essentially racist and addictive, the social performance of identity can make it difficult for some to believe that their queer identity can let them avoid this from other queers: See: Thomas Norman, Adam Bourne, Natalie Amos, Jennifer Power, Joel Anderson, Gene Lim, Marina Carman, and G. J. Meléndez-Torres, “Typologies of Alcohol and Other Drug-related Risk among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender

(Trans) and Queer Adults,” *Drug and Alcohol Review* 43, no. 2 (2024): 551–61. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dar.13814>.; Daniel Demant, and Bernard Saliba, “Queer Binge: Harmful Alcohol Use among Sexual Minority Young People in Australia,” *Public Health* 179 (2020): 18–26. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhe.2019.09.022>.; Lucy Jones, “‘If a Muslim says ‘homo’, nothing gets done’: Racist discourse and in-group identity construction in an LGBT youth group,” *Language in Society* 45, no. 1 (2016): 113–133. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404515000792>.

<sup>24</sup> Note that while feminism is not essentially racist, the social performance of identity can make it difficult for some to believe that their feminist identity can let them avoid this from other feminists: See: Ashlee Christoffersen, and Akwugo Emejulu, “‘Diversity Within’: The Problems with ‘Intersectional’ White Feminism in Practice,” *Social Politics* 30, no. 2 (2023): 630–53. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxac044>.; Linda Colley, and Catherine White, “Neoliberal Feminism: The Neoliberal Rhetoric on Feminism by Australian Political Actors,” *Gender, Work, and Organization* 26, no. 8 (2019): 1083–99. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12303>.; Dreama G. Moon, and Michelle A. Holling, “‘White Supremacy in Heels’: (White) Feminism, White Supremacy, and Discursive Violence,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 17, no. 2 (2020): 253–60. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2020.1770819>.

<sup>25</sup> Note that while Canadian identity is not essentially assimilationist, the laws and history of Canada can make it difficult to refute this politically, and thereby make it difficult for some to believe that their Canadian identity has any defenses against assimilationist rhetoric: See: Lisa Monchalin, *The Colonial Problem: An Indigenous Perspective on Crime and Injustice in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016).; Tom Silverstone, Leyland Cecco, Temujin Doran and Katie Lamborn, “Why is anti-immigration sentiment on the rise in Canada?” *The Guardian*, Tue 6 Aug 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=txyjmNXcWiU>.; Randy Besco and Erin Tolley, “12 Does Everyone Cheer? The Politics of Immigration and Multiculturalism in Canada,” in *Federalism and the Welfare State in a Multicultural World*, ed. Elizabeth Goodyear-Grant, John Myles, Will Kymlicka, and Richard Johnston (School of Policy Studies & McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2018).

<sup>26</sup> For a brief description of how modern gender and sexuality movements fare in Bangladesh, See: Ch 24 “Gender Movements” in: Willem van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh*, second edition (Cambridge, United Kingdom; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 300–311.

<sup>27</sup> Willem van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh*, second edition (Cambridge, United Kingdom; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 89–91, 190, 205–207, 281–284.

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